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THE CRY OF THE PENITENT.

A BABYLONIAN PRAYER.

By LOUISE SEYMOUR HOUGHTON,
New York City.

THAT the sense of sin is as old as self-consciousness becomes increasingly evident as history and psychology reveal more and more of the nature of man. The truth is confirmed by archæology. If by law came the knowledge of sin, it was the law written, not upon tables of stone, but upon the fleshly tablets of the heart. Centuries before Moses we find Assyrian and Egyptian agonizing before God under an intolerable self-condemnation.

An illustration of this was brought to light a few months ago in Babylonia. A tablet was deciphered bearing a hymn which for heartfelt penitence and genuine religious aspiration is worthy of a place beside the Penitential Psalms. Although this tablet is as late as Aššurbanipal ("the great and noble Osnapper," he is called in Ezra 4:10), as is certified on the tablet itself, there is said to be ample evidence that the prayer dates from before Abraham's time, or between 2500 and 2000 B. C. It is only one of a number of poems recently recovered and published in Germany under the title "Psalms of Penitence."

The English version which follows is from the German rendering by Mr. Heinrich Weine, published in *Die Christliche Welt*.¹ More remarkable even than the fidelity of these utterances to universal human experience is their close parallelism to the very expressions, the figures of speech, of the Hebrew poets:

O Lord, my sins are many,
Great are my misdeeds!
My God, my sins are many,
Great are my misdeeds!

¹ The German translation was compared with a French translation published a few months ago in Paris, before being rendered into English.

The sins which I've committed
Know I not;
The misdeeds which I've accomplished
Know I not.

Pain was my daily food,
I know not why;
Ill hap o'erwhelmed my life,
I know not why.

The Lord in his heart's scorn
Has looked on me;
My God in his heart's wrath
Has visited me.

I looked for help;
None took me by the hand.
I poured forth tears;
No man came to my side.

I cry aloud;
None hearkens to my cry.
Anguished I cast myself to earth,
I dare not look up.

To my merciful God I turn me;
Deep are my sighs.
O Lord, look kindly upon me,
Accept my tears!

Mankind is turned away
And has no understanding;
Each man called by a name,
What understanding has he?
Whether they do good or evil,
They have no understanding.

O Lord, thy bondman,
Spurn him not!
Overwhelmed by water-floods,
Seize him by the hand!

The sins which I've committed,
Change them to graces!
The misdeeds which I've practiced,
Let the wind drive them away!

Rend apart my iniquities
As one rends a garment !
My God, my sins are seven times seven,
Forgive my sins!

The complaint of the sorrowful heart,
Tablet on which each god loves to write.
His word
Secures my peace.

Conformed to the original,
Copied and revised.
Palace of Aššurbanipal, king of nations,
King of Assyria.